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Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel

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Fashion in Moderation

The *Ligue sociale d'acheteurs* and the appeal to female consumers at the turn of the twentieth century

Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel (CSO)

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Translated from French by Liz Carey-Libbrecht

When the descendants of the geographer Jean Brunhes decided to deposit his private papers at the French National Archives, in the early 2000s, they had one condition: that the documents regarding the associative action of this social Catholic also be conserved. This was how the archives of the *Ligue sociale d'acheteurs* [LSA - social consumers' league], which he founded in 1902 and hosted along with his wife Henriette, *née* Hoskier, up until the death of the latter in 1914, were conserved¹. Historians interested in these pioneering militants of consumerism have since had access to them. These records contain a large amount of correspondence and publications, as well as the productions of this League, including the calendar reproduced on the following page.

The calendar provides us with information on this association, its discourses, and the types of action that it invented at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the time, political action through consumption was not a novelty: it had previously been used in other countries to fight against slavery or to affirm American independence against the British colonizers². Consumption was a topic of interest in socialist circles, as demonstrated by the cooperative movement headed by Charles Gide as well as the British activists who defended their empire. The case of the *Ligue sociale d'acheteurs* is interesting in that it constitutes a specific example of the appropriation and transformation of an example originating elsewhere. This calendar provided the Catholic men and women using it with an original tool for action within the public sphere.

Political action through consumption

This pamphlet primarily informs us about the *Ligue sociale d'acheteurs*, a non-profit association in terms of the Law of 1901, created in 1902 by a small group of men and women who presented themselves as social Catholics⁴. The group was led by a couple: the geographer Jean Brunhes (1869-1930) and his wife Henriette Hoskier-Brunhes (1872-1914), better known as Henriette Jean Brunhes. Inspired by the American example, where consumers' leagues had existed since 1890, these militant Catholics came to see consumption as a way to carry out social or even political action without saying so⁵. This was even truer for women, who did not yet have the right to vote. Consumption was moreover also a field for substitution actions for Catholic intellectuals, the majority of whom were supporters of the Third Republic. They saw social action in association with other members of the “*nébuleuse réformatrice*” or loose conglomeration of reformists as a way to “find their place” within the Third Republic despite the prevalent mistrust of Catholics⁶.

Members of the *Ligue sociale d'acheteurs* participated in several large reform campaigns which laid the groundwork for labour laws in France: the defence of weekly rest time, the fight against the “sweating system”, in particular for women working from home, the regulation of night-time work for bakers, etc. From 1890-1910, the majority of laws – e.g. the Law of 1906 on weekly rest – were enacted following a long period of gestation but were poorly or rarely applied. In this context, the activism of militants, whether they were socialists, radicals, or social Catholics, played a crucial part in the genesis of labour rights.

The calendar sheds light on the philosophy of the *Ligue sociale d'acheteurs*: to encourage consumers to take the working conditions of labourers or employees into account in their purchases. Hence, long before the invention of “fair trade”, militants were invited to base their purchases on the rhythm of the work: not ordering during “high-volume periods” when the demand was high, and instead offering work to employees during the “off-season”.

For example, the calendar makes note of the seasonal nature of the work of professions related to the fashion and clothing industry (tailors, seamstresses, milliners, or hatters): they had a heavy workload during the months from March to June and then from September to December. The “high-volume” or overworked periods were April-May-June and October-November-December. During these months, consumers were advised to limit the work that they gave to these different professions by not ordering hats during Easter week or by waiting before requesting large jobs in November or December – or be responsible for “deathly nightshifts” [“*veillée homicide*”], the night-time shift for seamstresses. Inversely, during the months when these professions were “out of work” (in January-February and in July-August-September),

women were invited to give hatters felt hats to clean and seamstresses repairs to do, or to order new garments.

The business calendar is equally apparent. For example, members were advised to do their Christmas shopping at the beginning of December to avoid “overworking store employees” during the holidays. More generally, consumers were advised to be “polite and patient with store employees”, particularly during busy times.

Other occupations were also mentioned in the calendar with respect to consumers’ domestic needs: these included construction workers, bookbinders and framers, for example. Therefore, in January, when these professions were out of work, consumers were called upon to ask themselves: “Do we have any books to bind, furniture to repair, or mattresses to remake?” To support these recommendations, the *Ligue sociale d’acheteurs* invented specific modes of action such as their “white lists” [“*listes blanches*”] which indicated that suppliers complied with certain rules regarding working conditions or labelling. Suppliers’ labels were not commonly used in France, unlike the situation in the US, because they constituted competition for union labels. Labelling was a tool introduced by American unions at the end of the nineteenth century to encourage consumers to give preference to products manufactured by unionized workers. It was introduced to France by the the CGT federation of workers in the printing (*Fédération du Livre*) whose representative, Auguste Keufer, was closely tied to the LSA. This is why even though union labels were infrequently used in France, the LSA did not want to compete against it⁷.

These tools were combined with postcards and publications that used images or words to try to convince consumers of their responsibility towards workers, both in cities and the countryside. For example, the LSA published a series of postcards showing images such as seamstresses working from home or customers unrolling fabric. These postcards combined photos of misery with a text accusing consumers. League members were well aware that the photographs used in the postcards were not accurate reproductions of social realities. One league member, Baroness Marie-Thérèse de Brincard, wrote to Henriette Brunhes regarding these photos: “In the majority of the hovels where blue-collar workers work, it would be impossible to take photos due to the lack of light”. She indicated her preferences with respect to these photographs: “I would remove [the photo] of the worker in the attic who earns 2 to 3 francs per day; I don’t think that’s really a ‘starvation wage’. I would replace it with the image, which I think is very well composed, where people are manufacturing handles for irons (babies sitting on the ground, a young man working at the machine in the window, general disorder)”⁸. In other words, it was necessary to “show” a reality that was sufficiently squalid and different from what consumers

normally saw. Interestingly, a photo was deemed to be inadequate because the worker's wage was too high, whereas the wage was not visible in the image. This can be related to "misery expositions" [*expositions de la misère*], expositions of objects intended to show under what working conditions they were manufactured... except that indications only appeared on signs, because the objects had nothing specific about them⁹.

In 1912, the *Ligue sociale d'acheteurs* was already a well-established organization with 4,500 individual members across the French territory. At the time, its head office was no longer located in Paris where it was founded, but rather in Lyon, where its hosts were social Catholics closely associated with the *Chronique sociale* and "social weeks" [*semaines sociales*], the itinerant university of social Catholicism. Chapters existed in about twenty cities. The French league was closely associated with the Swiss league, as bulletins and letters published in collaboration attest, particularly because Jean and Henriette Brunhes moved to Switzerland, where the geographer taught. It was in Switzerland that the first international conference of social consumers' leagues was held, in 1908. That was when the slogan found on the calendar was first used: "To live is to buy, to buy is power, power is duty" [*Vivre c'est acheter, acheter c'est pouvoir, pouvoir c'est devoir*].

The *Ligue sociale d'acheteurs* was a mixed organization, as the list of chapter heads in France attests: eleven chapters were headed by women, and the same number by men. Even though this may partly have been for the image, it was representative and shows that this league, which was long presented as a women's association, was also a space of political activism for men.

The First World War put an end to its activities, despite multiple attempts to recreate it during the inter-war period, primarily around Jean and Henriette Brunhes' daughter, Mariel Brunhes-Delamarre (1905-2001) and the *Union féminine civique et sociale* [civil and social women's union]. Multiple factors explain its disappearance: mainly the death of Henriette Brunhes in 1914; the inability of the League to unite with other consumers' associations fighting against the "high cost of living"; and the existence of new modes of activism for social Catholics – including men as well as women – during the inter-war period. The *Union féminine civique et sociale* took the reins, but by becoming a "consumerist"-type consumers' association, it abandoned politically-active consumption in order defend consumers' rights.

A world destined to disappear?

Behind its advice and moralizing rules, this document implicitly shows us the consumption practices of the *haute bourgeoisie* who hosted this *Ligue sociale d'acheteurs*. The calendar

provides us with information on the objects that contributed to shaping bourgeois identity from the nineteenth century: clothing, furs, felt and straw hats, books, furniture or mattresses, stoves and heaters, or even trunks¹⁰. This association also most probably served to defend a world that would soon be lost.

The arrival of new products in fabric shops for women is noted in February, as well as the benefits for consumers in ordering at the right time: “the advantage of February purchases: a more complete choice, quicker delivery, more careful work”¹¹. However, what is apparent above all is the calendar of the movements of this bourgeois class, which went on vacation during the summer, whether to the countryside or, as was more often the case, to the family château or second home, and its social calendar, with its “season of dinners and receptions”.

This traditional calendar goes hand-in-hand with distrust of the democratization of consumption, which was establishing itself at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was clearly necessary to be distrustful of “sales”, which were necessarily deceitful, and to repair clothing in order to use it. In 1905, Baroness Brincard, a member of the *Ligue sociale d'acheteurs* from the outset, explained “sales prices” to her readers: “Certain women”, she criticized, “receive catalogues from all of the large stores, compare them, and go to the best deal above all else”. They waited for it to be “the time of the big sale for the exposition regarding this article (end of January for white, February for lace, October for furniture)”. They kept an eye out for deals, “tricked by this fascination with clever staging”, and purchased low-quality products. Moreover, this practice had social consequences for the workers who had produced this clothing: consequently, female consumers exploited – albeit involuntarily – the misery of other women. In other words, “when female consumers come to prefer good-quality well-made articles over junk, they will truly be saving money from their own point of view, and at the same time will be rendering a service to male or female workers, whose professional skills they will be encouraging by paying them for these abilities”¹².

This position with respect to the democratization of consumption goes hand-in-hand with criticism of credit: one must pay one’s bills immediately, we are told. However, we know that lower classes were granted greater access to credit in the early twentieth century, for instance through purchasing furniture at the Dufayel department store, where “collectors” [“*abonneurs*”] would subsequently visit households to recover the small amounts of money owed¹³.

The suppliers mentioned on the calendar had professions related to clothing (tailors, milliners, seamstresses, hatters, shirt-makers, furriers, etc.), or employees whose job was to maintain clothing (launderers). There were also cabinetmakers and other artisans (bookbinders, framers), who were studied by Pierre du Maroussem, a sociologist of Leplaysian inspiration. In 1900 du

Maroussem taught members of the *Ligue sociale d'acheteurs* how to carry out labour surveys, the results of which they used to draw up their white lists¹⁴. They would look at how seamstresses worked and would then list the workshops that respected certain social conditions. Fed by the example of the surveys carried out by American consumers' leagues, this practice of Catholic surveys established in study circles also benefited from the Leplaysian heritage passed on by Pierre du Maroussem through his classes at the *Collège libre des sciences sociales* [free college of social sciences]¹⁵.

Local commerce is also mentioned, consisting of confectioners, bakers, and pastry makers. It is apparent that the LSA's actions were based on its members' own world and were focused on the servants and labourers who worked for them. They were not interested in reforming the world of factories or that of the countryside.

While the members of the *Ligue sociale d'acheteurs* were both men and women, the advice was clearly gender-specific: the "whims" of female consumers were denounced, as were "useless unpacking" or "thoughtless complaints". Such criticism was normal at the time, and focused on the transience of feminine fashion as opposed to male fashion, which was admittedly very conservative. Within the league as well as elsewhere, rational consumers were often assumed to be male, whereas irrational consumers were most often women¹⁶. ■

Notes

1 Archives nationales, 615 AP, Fonds Jean Brunhes.

2 Charlotte Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender and British Slavery 1713-1833*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000; Timothy Hall Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2004; Lawrence B. Glickman, *Buying Power. Consumer Activism in America*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009.

3 Ellen Furlough, *Consumer Cooperation in France. The Politics of Consumption, 1834-1930*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991; Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation. Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.

4 Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel, *Consommateurs engagés à la Belle Époque. La Ligue sociale d'acheteurs*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2012.

5 Regarding American consumers' leagues, see in particular Landon R.Y. Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism. The National Consumers' League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2000; Kathryn K. Sklar, "The Consumers' White Label Campaign of the National Consumers' League, 1898-1918", in Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, Matthias Judt (dir.), *Getting and Spending. European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 17-35.

6 Christian Topalov (dir.), *Laboratoires du nouveau siècle. La nébuleuse réformatrice et ses réseaux en France (1880-1914)*, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, 1999.

7 Jean-Pierre Le Crom, "Le label syndical", in Jean-Pierre Le Crom (dir.), *Les acteurs de l'histoire du droit du travail*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005, p. 297-309.

8 Archives nationales, 615 AP 74, Letter from Marie-Thérèse Brincard to Henriette Brunhes, n.d. [1911].

9 Henriette Jean Brunhes, "Lettre sur les expositions portatives du travail à domicile, lue par M^{me} Léon Brunschvig à la Conférence de Versailles du 11 Juin 1908", *Bulletin des Ligues sociales d'acheteurs*, 1909, p. 188-191.

10 Manuel Charpy, *Le théâtre des objets. Espaces privés, culture matérielle et identité sociale. Paris, 1830-1914*, PhD thesis in history, Université de Tours, 2010.

11 This reminds us that ready-to-wear clothing did not yet exist for women, and bourgeois women therefore had to call upon seamstresses.

12 Baronne Georges Brincard, *Le prix des "bonnes occasions"*, Blois, Imprimeries réunies du centre, 1905 (article previously published in *Le Correspondant*, 25 June 1905).

13 Anaïs Albert, "Le crédit à la consommation des classes populaires à la Belle Époque. Invention, innovation ou reconfiguration?", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 4/2012, p. 1049-1082.

14 Pierre du Maroussem, *Les enquêtes. Pratique et théories*, Paris, Félix Alcan, 1900.

15 AN, 615 AP 82, Curriculum of the class by Mr. du Maroussem, Collège libre des sciences sociales, n.d. [1903]. Regarding the surveys by the *Ligue sociale d'acheteurs*, see Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel, "Genre, consommation et enquêtes sociales : la Ligue sociale d'acheteurs au début du siècle", in Christophe Charle and Julien Vincent (dir.), *La société civile. Savoirs, enjeux et acteurs en France et en Grande-Bretagne 1780-1914*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011, p. 293-314.

16 Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel, "The gender of consumption. The Ligue Sociale d'Acheteurs (1900-1914)", *L'Année sociologique*, Vol. 61, n° 1, 2011, p. 125-149; Kathleen G. Donohue, "What Genre Is the Consumer? The Role of Gender Connotations in Defining the Political", *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 33, n° 1, 1999, p. 19-44.